

■ ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Institutional Trust and Sector-Specific Corruption in Greece



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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how sector-specific corruption affects institutional trust in Greece and conceptualizes corruption as a governance and process-integrity deficit that constrains organizational excellence in both public and private settings. **Design/Methodology:** A mixed-methods approach based on analytical triangulation was used, combining a nationwide survey of 1 973 participants in Greece with a bibliometric analysis of 1 335 Scopus-indexed publications. This enabled a parallel assessment of citizen perceptions and dominant academic framings of corruption, governance, and accountability. **Findings:** Clear sectoral asymmetries emerge. Public-sector corruption is primarily associated with procedural opacity and administrative discretion, while bribery for expedited processing is perceived as more frequent in certain private-sector settings. The bibliometric analysis identifies three dominant research clusters: governance and accountability frameworks, ethical paradigms in public administration, and socio-economic drivers of corrupt behavior. There is also growing scholarly attention to digital transparency and accountability mechanisms. Institutional trust in Greece cannot be restored through legal reforms alone. **Practical Implications:** Anti-corruption interventions should support organizational excellence through process redesign, stronger accountability structures, leadership commitment, and digitally enabled transparency in both public and private institutions. **Originality/Value:** Sector-specific corruption is reframed as a barrier to process integrity, governance quality, and sustained organizational performance. Combining citizen-level perception data with bibliometric mapping bridges empirical institutional realities and academic knowledge production, extending the business excellence literature toward institutional trust as a strategic governance outcome.

Keywords: corruption, institutional trust, public-sector corruption, private-sector corruption, bibliometric analysis

JEL codes: D73, H83

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Data availability statement (DAS): The study generated survey data and compiled a bibliometric dataset for the purposes of analysis. The data are not publicly available due to privacy, ethical, and licensing restrictions, but may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics statement: This study was based on an anonymous, voluntary online survey. No personally identifiable information was collected or processed. Before participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the anonymous and confidential treatment of their responses, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. Completion and submission of the questionnaire were treated as informed consent. Under the institutional rules applicable to this project at the time of data collection, formal ethics committee approval was not required for anonymous, non-interventional survey research. The study was conducted in accordance with applicable institutional standards for research involving human participants.

Sex and Gender Reporting (SAGER statement): Sex was not collected or analyzed. Gender was collected only as a demographic characteristic of respondents, and sex- or gender-based differences were not examined in this study.

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1. Introduction

Corruption refers to a set of practices involving the misuse of entrusted authority for private benefit, occurring through both formal violations of established rules and informal institutional arrangements. Rather than constituting a single, uniform phenomenon, corruption manifests in differentiated forms across sectors, organizations, and systems of governance, shaped by regulatory frameworks, degrees of administrative discretion, and prevailing social norms (Bitzenis et al., 2015; Vlachos & Bitzenis, 2018). Economic scholarship consistently shows the imposition of significant transaction costs, the distortion of resource allocation, and the adverse effects on institutional effectiveness, collectively undermining trust in both the public and private sectors (Ervasti et al., 2018; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). These analyses highlight how corruption undermines citizens' normative expectations of fairness and accountability, substantially eroding institutional legitimacy and hindering economic productivity.

In Greece's public sector, corruption primarily manifests through systemic bribery, commonly known as "fakelaki", patronage networks, and pervasive informal economic practices (Papadoulis, 2006; Trantidis & Tsagkroni, 2017). These forms of corruption are rooted in the historical entrenchment of party-based clientelism, administrative opacity, and extensive discretionary authority (Iakovidis, 2020). Over time, such practices have consolidated

into institutional norms, frequently sustained by weak accountability structures and organizational inertia. Their socio-political effects include the erosion of the rule of law, profound public disillusionment, and widespread mistrust of state mechanisms (Afonso et al., 2014). In the private sector, corruption is less publicly visible yet equally detrimental to economic stability and market confidence. Typical manifestations include tax evasion, informal payments, and collusive arrangements in procurement and service delivery (Dreher & Schneider, 2010). These practices often originate in regulatory ambiguity, insufficient enforcement, and perceived impunity (Mitsopoulos & Pelagidis, 2009). They develop in contexts where informal networks substitute for formal oversight, leading to market distortions, reduced competitiveness, and entrenched perceptions of systemic unfairness among citizens (Vousinas, 2017). Utilizing latent DYMIMIC (Dynamic Multiple Indicators Multiple Causes) and currency-demand methodologies, Katsios (2006) assessed Greece's shadow economy at approximately 28.2% of its official GDP in the early 2000s, positioning Greece among OECD nations with the highest shadow economy proportions, consistently ranging between 20% and 25% in earlier periods. This subterranean economic activity substantially reduces governmental revenue, impairs the provision of public services, and diverts governmental attention towards rent-seeking rather than competent governance. Consequently, corrupt practices embedded in public procurement, licensing, and other similar routine administrative procedures, increase operational costs, deter foreign direct investment, and amplify fiscal vulnerabilities, conditions starkly exemplified during Greece's sovereign-debt crisis (Kotios et al., 2017). These systemic deficiencies directly result in chronically low levels of public confidence in state institutions, corroborated by national surveys and comparative governance indices (Bitzenis et al., 2016; Skiadas et al., 2016).

In the private sector, corruption is less publicly visible yet significantly detrimental to economic stability and market confidence. In their study, Athanasouli et al. (2012), utilizing data from the 2004–2005 Business Environment and Enterprise Performance Survey (BEEPS), found that Greek enterprises on average paid unofficial payments equivalent to approximately 0.49% of their total sales, with pronounced sectoral variations: mining and quarrying (1.28%), transportation and storage (0.80%), and construction (0.70%). Their econometric analyses further demonstrate that higher proportions of unofficial payments are negatively correlated with both firm size and growth rates over a three-year period. Moreover, pervasive corporate tax evasion and unfair competitive practices exacerbate these effects by eroding trust in market institutions and fostering perceptions that business success is contingent upon informal connections rather than competitive merit (Vlachos & Bitzenis, 2016).

Empirical research specifically addressing the Greek context has revealed nuanced relationships between sectoral corruption and institutional trust. Through longitudinal analyses (2002–2011), Ervasti et al. (2018) demonstrated that trust in political and impartial public institutions sharply declined during Greece's economic crisis, contrasting with stable or slightly improved levels of generalized interpersonal trust. Complementing this finding, Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) used multilevel modeling to reveal that in high-corruption contexts, such as Greece, increased education heightens citizens' sensitivity to corruption, thereby intensifying the erosion of institutional trust. While scandals in the public sector typically precipitate acute drops in political trust, private-sector malfeasance contributes to persistent narratives of systemic corruption, thereby sustaining widespread institutional distrust.

Qualitative examinations further elucidate the normalization processes perpetuating corruption in Greek public-sector organizations. Fleming et al. (2020) advanced a "second-order" normalization framework, suggesting that corrupt practices achieve institutional entrenchment not only through habitual engagement ("first-order normalization") but also via broader organizational acceptance among non-participating employees. Their interviews

highlighted how inadequate enforcement mechanisms and deeply entrenched patronage structures foster an organizational culture that tolerates unethical practices, thereby embedding corruption as an institutionalized norm, which further erodes public trust and organizational integrity.

The literature outlines a reinforcing cycle in which corruption in Greece's public and private sectors imposes significant economic burdens, distorts competitive dynamics, and substantially erodes institutional legitimacy. Public-sector corruption typically triggers pronounced institutional mistrust, particularly during crises, while private-sector corruption perpetuates broader narratives of systemic inequity. Scholars have employed diverse methodological approaches, including macro-level comparative surveys, econometric analyses of firm-level data, and qualitative case studies, to rigorously substantiate both the presence and underlying mechanisms of the corruption-trust dynamic within the Greek economic context (Bitzenis et al., 2007; Bitzenis et al., 2009). In the business excellence literature, sustained organizational performance increasingly depends on process integrity through transparent, standardized, and auditable workflows (Charron & Lapuente, 2013; Locatelli et al., 2017). From this perspective, corruption constitutes a systemic process failure that prevents excellence models and quality management systems from functioning as intended. This study frames sector-specific corruption as a governance and accountability deficit and links it to institutional trust in order to show where transparency by design, digitalized service delivery, and stronger internal audit mechanisms can support continuous improvement and long-term performance in both public organizations and private enterprises.

This study is grounded in Institutional Theory, which provides an analytical framework for examining how formal rules, informal norms, and organizational routines shape institutional trust. From this perspective, corruption in Greece is viewed not merely as individual misconduct, but as an institutionalized practice that persists where formal governance arrangements come into conflict with entrenched social logics. In parallel, the Principal-Agent framework is employed to conceptualize corruption as a breakdown of accountability, whereby agents prioritize private benefit over the principal's collective interest, thereby directly undermining public confidence. This dual theoretical lens enables a systematic differentiation between public- and private-sector corruption, attributing trust deficits in the public sector primarily to structural institutional failures, while associating distrust in the private sector with misaligned incentives and regulatory asymmetries. Prior studies often isolate either the public or the private sector and seldom treat corruption and institutional trust as interlinked constructs (Papadoulis, 2006). This study addresses this gap by examining how sector-specific corruption dynamics shape public perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Drawing on insights from political economy, institutional theory, and corruption studies, the analysis conceptualizes trust as a proxy for perceived institutional credibility within governance systems characterized by persistent formal-informal tensions. The Greek case provides a high-salience context in which systemic corruption and prolonged crisis conditions have jointly reconfigured trust trajectories. This research addresses the following questions: (1) How do distinct forms of public and private-sector corruption affect institutional trust in Greece? (2) What discrepancies emerge between citizen perceptions and scholarly framings of corruption? (3) How do sectoral variations in corruption modalities influence trust asymmetries across institutional domains? By integrating survey-based citizen responses with bibliometric mapping of scholarly discourse, the study advances a cross-sectoral, mixed-methods approach that contributes to theoretical debates on corruption as a trust-eroding institutional condition.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating an empirical survey with bibliometric data analysis. The justification for employing a mixed-methods approach derives from the study's dual analytical objective: to investigate corruption simultaneously as

a lived institutional experience shaping citizens' perceptions of trust and as a theoretically constructed phenomenon embedded within scholarly discourse (Seligson, 2002; Warren, 2004). The methodological integration enables a comparative and multidimensional assessment of how corruption is experienced, interpreted, and conceptualized across both public and private institutional domains.

Primary data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered to 1 973 respondents across multiple regions of Greece. The survey instrument was developed on the basis of an extensive review of the international literature on corruption, institutional trust, tax morale, and the shadow economy, drawing upon internationally established measurement frameworks promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Johnson et al., 1998; Schneider & Enste, 2003). These frameworks were carefully adapted to the Greek socioeconomic context under the scientific supervision of Professor Friedrich Schneider, a leading international authority on the empirical measurement of corruption and informal economic activity (Schneider & Buehn, 2007).

The questionnaire was administered electronically through a research infrastructure developed within the framework of the European THALES research programme, which has previously been employed in large-scale empirical investigations of corruption and the shadow economy in Greece. Prior to full-scale deployment, the instrument underwent pilot testing on a limited subsample to assess clarity, internal consistency, and the appropriate calibration of response categories (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The finalized questionnaire employed seven-point Likert-type scales to capture both the perceived frequency and intensity of corruption-related practices, a measurement format consistent with internationally recognized governance and corruption surveys (Frey & Torgler, 2007).

Sampling followed a stratified design to ensure broad representativeness across geographical regions, age cohorts, and gender categories. This large-scale sample ensures a high level of statistical power, with a margin of error of $\pm 2.2\%$ at a 95% confidence interval. To mitigate social desirability bias, particularly salient given the sensitive nature of corruption-related behaviors and attitudes, full respondent anonymity was guaranteed, and indirect, forced-choice questioning techniques were incorporated into the survey design (Nga & Shanmuganathan, 2010). Common method variance was addressed ex ante through the randomization of question order, while post-stratification statistical weighting based on the most recent ELSTAT census data was applied to enhance external validity and generalizability (Kalton & Cervantes, 2003; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Finally, potential non-response bias was evaluated by comparing respondents and non-respondents on observable demographic characteristics, with no statistically significant differences identified (Frey & Torgler, 2007). Concurrently, the bibliometric corpus was compiled from the Scopus database (Baas et al., 2020; Bitzenis & Koutsoupas, 2023b; Bitzenis & Koutsoupas, 2024b) using the following search query:

```
TITLE-ABS-KEY ((corruption OR bribery ) AND ("public sector" OR "private sector")) AND
(LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO
(SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "DECI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA ,
"MULT")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND ( LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))
```

All retrieved records were processed through the PRISMA 2020 framework, to ensure methodological transparency and facilitate reproducibility (Page et al., 2021), as shown in Figure 1.

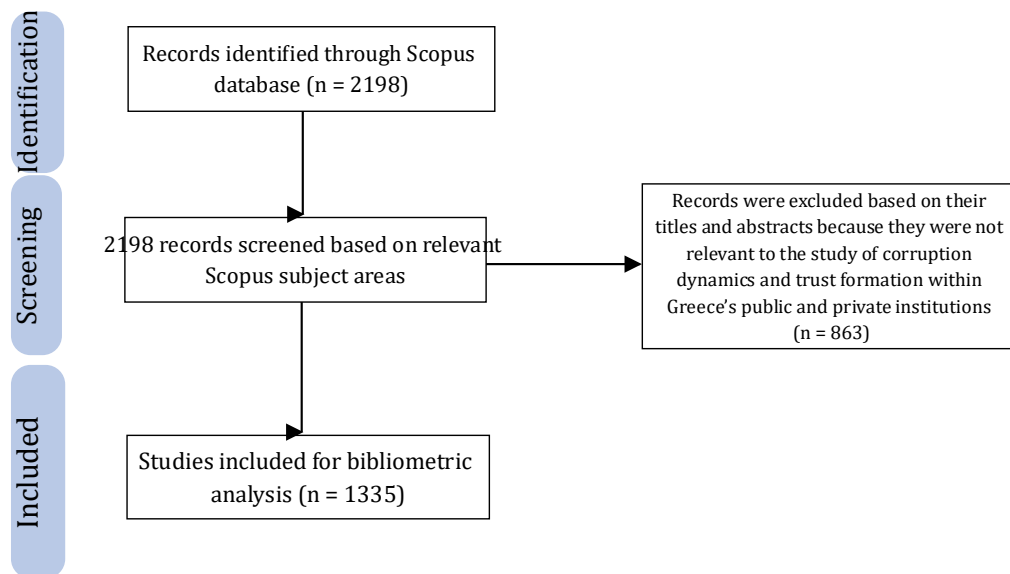
Upon completion of data acquisition, both datasets underwent systematic preparation for analysis. Questionnaire responses were imported into Microsoft Excel, where each variable was coded and missing or inconsistent entries were corrected (Bitzenis et al., 2023; Bitzenis & Koutsoupas, 2023a; Bitzenis & Koutsoupas, 2024a). The refined dataset was subsequently transferred to RStudio for the execution of descriptive analyses. In parallel,

bibliometric records obtained from Scopus were loaded and analyzed via the bibliometrix package, thereby facilitating the computation of principal metrics and the construction of thematic maps and ranked citation tables (Bitzenis et al., 2025a; Bitzenis et al., 2025b; Bitzenis et al., 2025c). Collectively, these procedures enabled the delineation of research clusters, the mapping of thematic trajectories, and the identification of substantive lacunae within the scholarly corpus (Koutsoupas, 2024; Koutsoupas & Nosios, 2025; Thomos et al., 2023).

The integration of survey-based empirical data with bibliometric mapping serves a dual epistemic purpose. The nationwide survey captures the perceptions of 1 973 citizens in Greece regarding corruption, institutional performance, and trust. The bibliometric analysis examines whether and to what extent these concerns are reflected in the scholarly literature. This dual-source enables comparison between how institutional trust is expressed by citizens and how it is framed in academic research. By triangulating these two datasets, the study identifies "blind spots"—areas where the literature remains conceptually or empirically underdeveloped, particularly concerning private-sector bribery and its implications for institutional trust in Greece and similar Mediterranean contexts. Although the two datasets differ in method and scope, both are interpreted through a systemic lens that emphasizes the interaction between formal governance frameworks and informal mechanisms, such as clientelist exchanges, regulatory circumvention, and personalized access, which shape corruption in practice (Misangyi et al., 2008). This perspective aligns with scholarship that treats corruption as deviant behavior and structurally embedded phenomenon linked to legitimacy deficits, normative ambiguity, and failures of accountability (Seligson, 2002; Treisman, 2007; Warren, 2004).

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Selection Process



Note. Source: Author's illustration based on the PRISMA 2020 selection procedure and Scopus retrieval.

The analysis is structured around a parallel design that differentiates corruption dynamics across the public and private sectors. These domains are treated as institutionally distinct yet empirically comparable, each characterized by specific modalities of misconduct, regulatory architectures, and accountability deficits (Treisman, 2000). Public-sector corruption is examined through the lens of bureaucratic discretion, entrenched clientelism, and procedural opacity, while private-sector malfeasance is assessed in relation to informal

exchanges, fiscal non-compliance, and market distortion (Williams, 2019). Survey data and bibliometric outputs are interpreted within their respective institutional contexts, allowing for sector-specific inference without conceptual conflation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This dual-track approach enables a comparative perspective on how divergent corruption patterns shape institutional trust across governance environments (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

3. Results

This section presents key findings from two parallel analyses: a survey of public perceptions and a bibliometric mapping of scholarly discourse. The former provides empirical insight into how citizens perceive corruption and institutional trust across sectors, while the latter situates these perceptions within the dominant frames of academic knowledge production. The results foreground emergent patterns and conceptual gaps that inform the corruption-trust dynamic in the Greek context. Institutional trust is examined through self-reported confidence in state institutions, regulatory bodies, and market actors, thereby enabling cross-sectoral comparison.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Description	Results
Main information about data	
Timespan (years)	1979–2025
Sources (Journals, Books, etc.)	725
Documents	1 335
Annual Growth Rate %	8.46
Document Average Age	8.61
Average citations per doc	20.64
References	63 176
Document contents	
Keywords Plus (ID)	1 373
Author's Keywords (DE)	3 020
Authors	
Authors	2 698
Authors of single-authored docs	425
Authors collaboration	
Single-authored docs	463
Co-Authors per Doc	2.27
International co-authorships %	23.52
Document types	
Article	1 335

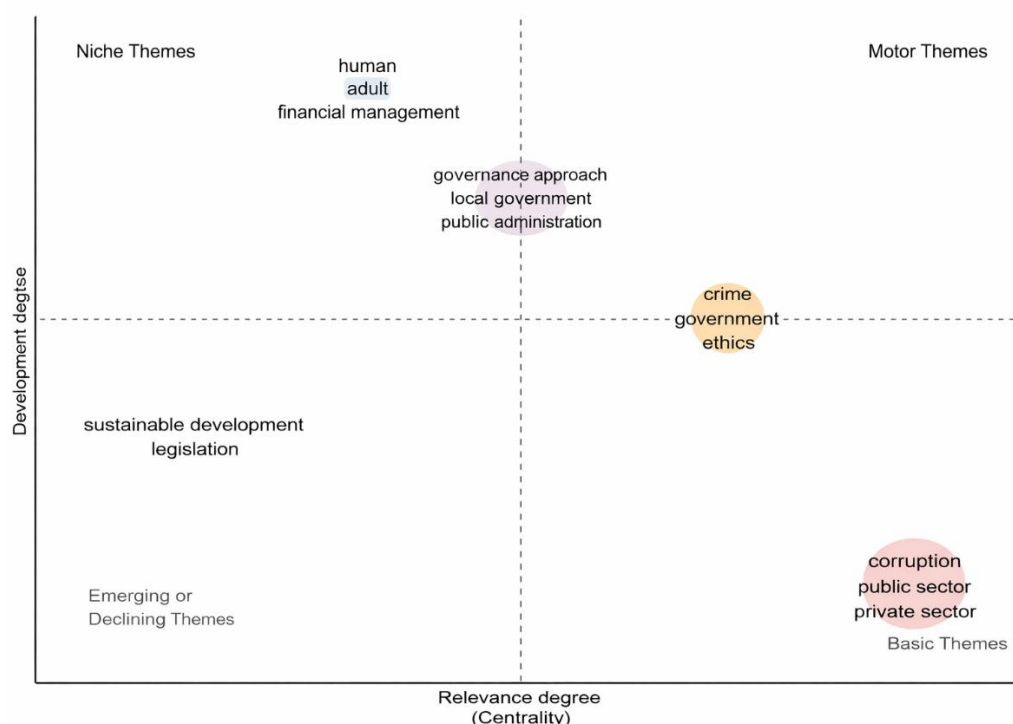
Note. Source: Authors' calculation based on the Scopus dataset; DE = authors' keywords; ID = Keywords Plus.

As shown in Table 1, the bibliometric dataset covers the period from 1979 to mid-2025 and includes 1 335 peer-reviewed articles from 725 distinct sources, such as academic journals, edited volumes, and conference proceedings. Over this 46-year span, the documents have a mean publication age of 8.61 years, reflecting a field that combines foundational work with an increasingly dense body of recent scholarship. The compound annual growth rate of 8.46% indicates sustained and accelerating scholarly interest, while a mean citation rate of 20.64 per article suggests a high level of academic engagement and intellectual influence across the corpus.

The dataset references 63 176 works and includes 1 373 Keywords Plus terms and 3 020 author-assigned keywords. This dual indexing highlight both standardized thematic patterns and the unique conceptual framings introduced by individual scholars, resulting in a richly textured keyword landscape that captures the ongoing evolution of research on corruption and institutional trust. Authorship patterns show an average of 2.27 co-authors per article. Single-authored publications total 463, accounting for slightly more than one-third of the corpus, while international collaborations make up 23.52% of all entries, indicating a moderate but notable level of cross-national scholarly exchange, especially in comparative research contexts.

Further analysis reveals 2 698 unique contributors, of whom 425 have published single-authored works. The predominance of multi-authored contributions reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field, which draws significantly from economics, political science, public administration, and sociology. All 1 335 entries are classified as articles, underscoring the centrality of peer-reviewed journals as the main vehicle for scholarly dissemination. Together, these descriptive metrics outline the contours of a maturing academic field, characterized by consistent growth, thematic breadth, and a collaborative research network that balances individual authorship with interdisciplinary partnership.

Figure 2
Thematic Map



Note. Source: Authors' illustration based on bibliometric analysis of the Scopus dataset.

The thematic map seen in Figure 2 employs a two-dimensional framework in which *centrality* (horizontal axis) indicates a theme's relevance to the broader field, while *density* (vertical axis) reflects its internal cohesiveness. Each bubble represents a cluster of co-occurring keywords, with its size denoting the volume of associated publications. The resulting quadrants, basic, motor, niche, and emerging/declining, reveal which topics constitute the conceptual core of the literature, which propel it forward, and which remain peripheral or underdeveloped (Koutsoupas & Nosios, 2025).

In the lower right quadrant, designated basic themes, the keywords "corruption", "public sector", and "private sector" occupy prominent positions. These concepts exhibit high

centrality yet comparatively low density, signifying their foundational role within the literature while underscoring the breadth of their conceptual boundaries and the nascent stage of their internal development. Their placement suggests that scholars often use these terms as entry points for inquiry, thereby structuring much of the discourse in this domain. The centrality of these themes underscores their function as the primary framework for comparative analyses in the Greek context, whereas their lower density suggests ample opportunity for conceptual refinement and deeper analytical engagement.

Conversely, the upper right quadrant, representing motor themes, encompasses "crime", "government", and "ethics". The high density and centrality of these clusters attest to their robust integration within the broader literature and their substantial thematic cohesion. The juxtaposition of ethics with crime and government highlights a mature body of scholarship that systematically interrogates the ethical dimensions of governance and the ramifications of criminal activity for institutional trust. Collectively, these themes form an interconnected research nexus that is both methodologically sophisticated and central to the study of corruption in public and private institutions.

Situated near the center of the map, the intermediary cluster of governance approach, local government, and public administration functions as a mediating nexus within the literature, bridging general frameworks and more specialized thematic areas. The moderate centrality and density of these concepts reflect their dual role: they serve as connective tissue linking broader thematic strands and as subjects of focused scholarly inquiry, particularly in analyses of governance structures and practices across varying administrative levels.

In the upper left quadrant, designated niche themes, the terms "human", "adult", and "financial management" demonstrate high density but lower centrality, indicating well-developed subfields that remain peripheral to the core discourse. These specific themes, encompassing demographic studies and financial management practices, constitute concentrated bodies of research that, while internally cohesive, exert limited influence on the central debates surrounding corruption and institutional trust in Greece.

The lower left quadrant, typically characterized by emerging or declining themes, includes "sustainable development" and "legislation". Their marginal positioning suggests limited thematic development and relevance in the current literature. This peripherality may reflect either the nascency of these topics as areas of scholarly interest or a waning focus. Further research is warranted to determine whether these themes will increase in salience or remain at the periphery of the field.

The thematic map delineates a research landscape anchored by comparative corruption studies across sectors, bolstered by the mature, interconnected themes of government, ethics, and crime, and interwoven with governance-centered inquiries. Meanwhile, niche and peripheral themes signal fertile terrain for future conceptual expansion and redirection within the literature.

Table 2 presents the top 10 most cited papers on corruption and institutional trust, providing a comparative analysis of the public and private sectors and highlighting the key studies that have shaped this area of research. Primarily, Rodriguez et al. (2005) articulate a two-dimensional framework, pervasiveness, and arbitrariness, to account for how multinational enterprises navigate corrupt host environments. They demonstrate that when bribery is both widespread and predictable, firms treat it as a quasi-fixed cost, favoring wholly owned subsidiaries to safeguard proprietary assets and maintain managerial control. Conversely, when corruption is arbitrary and erratic, firms tend to gravitate toward joint ventures to share risks and enhance their local legitimacy. This typology elucidates why firms determine entry modes not solely in relation to conventional economic variables, such as market size or labor costs, but also respond to the specific risk profile embedded in the host country's institutional corruption. Building on this insight, Ayyagari et al. (2010) examine a dataset of over 2 400 Chinese firms to compare formal bank credit with informal financing through

moneylenders and relational networks. Their findings indicate that access to formal bank loans is strongly and positively associated with sales growth and productivity improvements, whereas informal finance offers no significant benefit once endogeneity is addressed via instrumental-variable techniques. These results reinforce the conclusion that transparent, rules-based financial institutions bolster firms' confidence in contract enforcement and long-term planning.

Table 2
Top 10 Most Cited Papers

Paper	Total Citations
Rodriguez et al. (2005), Acad Manage Rev	520
Ayyagari et al. (2010), Rev Financ Stud	518
Montinola & Jackman (2002), Br J Polit Sci	462
Acemoglu & Verdier (2000), Am Econ Rev	441
Knack (2001), South Econ J	398
Rothschild & Miethe (1999), Work Occup	313
Acemoglu & Verdier (1998), Econ J	313
Beck et al. (2006), J Monet Econ	304
Locatelli et al. (2017), Int J Proj Manage	274
Hakhverdian & Mayne (2012), J Polit	260

Note. Source: Authors' calculation based on the Scopus dataset..

The adaptive strategies of firms in corrupt environments reflect broader political dynamics, which Montinola and Jackman (2002) explore through cross-national data from the early 1980s. They uncover a nonlinear relationship between political competition and corruption: autocratic regimes, through centralized authority, often suppress corruption; transitional democracies, with fragile institutions, experience surges in rent-seeking; and only consolidated democracies effectively constrain corruption through accountability mechanisms. Additionally, they demonstrate that oil-dependent states exhibit persistently high levels of corruption, as resource rents bypass formal fiscal institutions and undermine bureaucratic incentives for transparency. In a parallel theoretical intervention, Acemoglu and Verdier (2000) model the interplay between bureaucratic rent-seeking and enforcement costs in a general equilibrium framework. They demonstrate that paying efficiency wages to public officials can reduce bribery; however, in low-income settings, the fiscal burden may outweigh the anticipated gains. Critically, they identify a "*free-lunch*" region wherein incremental enforcement enhancements reduce corruption, attract investment, and improve human capital allocation, offering a tractable reform trajectory for developing economies.

The proposition that some degree of corruption may constitute a tolerable inefficiency is formalized in Acemoglu and Verdier's (1998) earlier model, which examines a principal-agent relationship with upstream investment. They contend that complete deterrence of bureaucratic rent extraction is often prohibitively expensive, and that under specific parameter configurations, a second-best equilibrium, marked by partial corruption, can yield superior social welfare outcomes. Yet, this equilibrium also distorts investment incentives and talent allocation, suggesting that anti-corruption reforms must weigh enforcement costs against broader developmental priorities. Transitioning from theoretical abstraction to empirical analysis, Beck et al. (2006) utilize survey data from 2 500 firms in 37 countries to investigate how different banking supervision regimes shape the impact of corruption as a financing constraint. They find that supervision frameworks emphasizing market discipline, particularly through mandatory disclosures and external audits, significantly reduce firms perceived corruption-related obstacles. In contrast, traditional regulatory oversight exerts

negligible influence. Their results suggest that transparency-enhancing mechanisms empower market actors and fortify institutional trust in financial governance.

Knack (2001) further examines the macroeconomic effects of corruption by using instrumental-variable techniques to evaluate how foreign aid influences governance quality. Contrary to conventional assumptions, he finds that higher aid-to-GDP ratios are associated with increased corruption, weaker rule of law, and reduced bureaucratic performance. Instead of promoting reform, large, unconditional aid flows seem to encourage rent extraction. As a result, Knack recommends that donors focus on technical assistance, capacity building, and strict conditionalities rather than indiscriminate capital transfers. At the project implementation level, Locatelli et al. (2017) introduce the concept of the "corrupt project context," using the Italian high-speed rail case to show how pervasive corruption in the planning, procurement, and execution stages of infrastructure megaprojects leads to significant cost overruns and delays. They argue that standard project management frameworks lack built-in anti-corruption measures and advocate for institutionalizing real-time auditing, public transparency platforms, and strong whistle-blower protections as essential components of project governance.

The cyclical relationship between corruption and citizen trust connects institutional architecture with individual experience. Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012), using European Social Survey data from 21 democracies, show that education moderates the effect of corruption on institutional trust. In high-corruption contexts, educated citizens tend to have lower trust, likely due to higher civic expectations and greater awareness. In contrast, in low-corruption settings, education increases trust by reinforcing perceptions of institutional legitimacy. This cross-level interaction indicates that the benefits of anti-corruption reforms are not distributed equally and that public education initiatives must align civic expectations with institutional improvements. Complementing this quantitative analysis, Rothschild and Miethe (1999) conduct extensive interviews with U.S. whistleblowers and silent observers to document the personal costs of reporting wrongdoing. Their findings show that whistleblowers, especially in the public sector, face significant retaliation, including termination, ostracism, and legal intimidation. These results highlight the precarious balance between individual agency and organizational control, emphasizing that without comprehensive whistleblower protections, internal dissent is suppressed, informational asymmetries persist, and systemic trust is undermined.

Together, these ten studies present a coherent, multi-layered account: firms adapt strategically to the corruption they encounter; political institutions both modulate and are shaped by corrupt incentives; theoretical models provide calibrated frameworks for enforcement policy; empirical analyses highlight the role of financial architecture and market discipline; and citizen responses reveal the psychosocial dimensions of institutional legitimacy. Collectively, they advocate for sophisticated anti-corruption policies attuned to the complexity of corruption's structure, the motivations of bureaucrats, the institutional design of financial markets, and the varied experiences of citizens, to foster durable public and private trust and sustain equitable economic development.

These studies collectively outline a multi-scalar architecture for corruption analysis; however, bibliometric mapping reveals persistent abstraction in the field. Dominant contributions favor generalized typologies, theoretical modeling, and prescriptive reformist narratives, with limited empirical grounding in specific national contexts such as Greece. Although institutional trust is occasionally referenced, it rarely appears as a distinct analytical category or is examined in relation to sector-specific corruption dynamics. This gap affirms the relevance of the present study's empirical focus, which synthesizes public perceptions and scholarly patterns to examine how differentiated corruption modalities contribute to trust deficits within historically embedded governance regimes.

Table 3*Perceived Bribery and Reporting Effectiveness by Sector*

Sector	(1a) M (SD)	(1a) Mode	(1a) n	(1b) M (SD)	(1b) Mode	(1b) n
Private	4.33 (1.71)	4	1 932	3.68 (1.71)	4	1 939
Public	3.39 (2.02)	1	1 959	4.10 (1.75)	4	1 944

Note. Source: Authors' survey data. Questionnaire item (1a): "Based on what you have heard, in which settings is the phenomenon of bribing officials for the expedited processing of cases most commonly observed?" Questionnaire item (1b): "Can such practices be avoided if the interested party seeks assistance from another official or reports the incident to a supervisor?" *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *n* = valid responses; all items were measured on 7-point scales.

Table 3 illustrates a pronounced disparity in the incidence of bribery between private organizations and public institutions. The mean frequency rating for private-sector bribery stands at 4.33 on a seven-point scale, indicating that, on average, people believe illicit payments to expedite cases occur more often than "sometimes." By contrast, the public sector's mean of 3.39 falls below the neutral midpoint, suggesting respondents deem graft in government settings to be less common. With sample sizes of nearly 1 900 for both measures, these averages are based on robust data, underscoring a broadly shared view that businesses offer more opportunities for procedural corruption than bureaucracies do. A closer examination of central tendency and dispersion highlights how perceptions cluster differently across sectors. In the private sector, the mode of 4 coincides with the mean, and its standard deviation of 1.71 reveals moderate consensus around that midpoint. Responses span the full range from 1 ("Never") to 7 ("Very often"), but most concentrate between scores of 3 and 5. In the public sector, the picture is more polarized. Although the mode is 1, indicating that the largest single group of respondents believes bribery to be "never" or "almost never" practiced, the standard deviation of 2.02 signals substantial variability. Some respondents rate public-sector bribery as highly prevalent, scoring it as high as 7, while others view it as virtually nonexistent. This bimodality reflects divergent experiences or information sources concerning government malfeasance.

Turning to the question of whether reporting a bribery attempt to another official or supervisor would deter the practice, perceptions again differ by sector. Public institutions receive a mean effectiveness rating of 4.10, nudging above neutral, which implies modest confidence that escalation can check corrupt demands. Private organizations, on the other hand, score slightly below the midpoint at 3.68, indicating general skepticism about the power of internal reporting to halt illicit requests. Both sectors share a mode of 4; here, the plurality in each context regards reporting as neither consistently effective nor outright futile. Standard deviations of 1.75 for the public sector and 1.71 for the private sector are nearly identical, suggesting similar degrees of uncertainty regarding the preventive value of escalation across both domains.

Private-sector environments are perceived as more susceptible to bribery yet less responsive to escalation, with respondents clustering around moderate to high prevalence and moderate doubts about the efficacy of reporting. In contrast, public institutions are viewed as less prone to graft and modestly capable of self-correction through supervisors, albeit with sharply divided views on the frequency of corruption. The wider dispersion of public-sector prevalence responses, evident in its higher standard deviation and bimodal mode, reflects a mixture of trust in bureaucratic integrity among some respondents and suspicion of hidden malpractices among others. Meanwhile, the tighter distribution of private-sector assessments suggests a more uniform experience or belief that corporate processes are vulnerable to expedited misconduct and lack robust internal controls.

As seen in Table 4, respondents report a widespread perception of bribery across various public institutions, with mean frequency ratings clustering above the midpoint of a

seven-point scale (where higher scores denote greater perceived prevalence). Hospitals emerge as the most corruption-prone, with a mean rating of 5.83, closely followed by *urban planning* agencies (5.80) and *public financial services* (5.53). *Customs offices* also rank high (5.32), and *transport services* score 5.15, indicating that health care facilities, planning departments, and revenue-related agencies are viewed as particularly vulnerable to illicit payments.

Intermediate perceptions characterize *local authorities* (mean of 4.89) and *insurance organizations* (4.34), suggesting that bribery is considered relatively common in municipal governance and semi-public insurers, albeit not as endemic as in the health or planning sectors. At the lower end of the spectrum are *public enterprises and organizations* (4.00) and *port authorities* (4.07). Police services register a relatively modest mean of 4.24, indicating a belief that bribery in law enforcement occurs only slightly more often than "sometimes."

Table 4
Perceived Bribery in Public Organizations

Institution	<i>M</i>	Mode	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Customs	5.32	6	1.48	1 929
Hospitals	5.83	7	1.30	1 945
Public Finance	5.53	6	1.41	1 933
Ports	4.07	4	1.58	1 905
Insurance Organizations	4.34	4	1.54	1 915
Local Authorities	4.89	6	1.60	1 920
Transport	5.15	7	1.70	1 928
Police	4.24	4	1.73	1 927
Urban Planning	5.80	7	1.44	1 944
Public Enterprises	4.00	4	1.73	1 907

Note. Source: Authors' survey data. Questionnaire item: "Have you heard of cases of bribery in public organizations? If so, please indicate how frequently you believe bribery occurs." *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *n* = valid responses; 1 = never; 7 = very often.

Modal values reinforce these distinctions. Hospitals and urban planning agencies exhibit a mode of 7, indicating that the largest subgroup of respondents believes bribery occurs "always" or "almost always" in these settings. Transport services share this modal peak. Customs offices, public financial services, and local authorities register modes of 6, while port authorities, insurance organizations, police, and public enterprises all report a mode of 4, suggesting a prevailing view that bribery in these institutions occurs at a moderate frequency. Standard deviations further illuminate the range of perceptions. Hospitals exhibit the lowest dispersion (*SD* = 1.30), followed closely by urban planning (*SD* = 1.44), indicating a strong consensus around high corruption levels in these domains. In contrast, the higher standard deviations associated with police (1.73) and port authorities (1.58) suggest more polarized views: some respondents perceive pervasive graft, while others view these sectors as relatively clean.

All ten categories reflect the full range of possible responses, from 1 ("Never") to 7 ("Very often"), underscoring the heterogeneity of public opinion on institutional corruption. With nearly 1 900 observations per category, these results derive from a robust and consistent sample. Overall, hospitals and urban planning agencies emerge as the public bodies most strongly and uniformly associated with frequent bribery, whereas police, port authorities, and public enterprises elicit more moderate and variegated assessments, highlighting sector-specific reputational disparities in perceptions of corrupt practices.

Table 5*Perceived Bribery in Private-sector Settings*

Private-sector setting	<i>M</i>	Mode	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Driving Schools	5.45	7	1.73	1 923
Private Clinic	4.46	7	1.95	1 911
Tax advisory	4.34	4	1.72	1 913
Law Office	4.60	4	1.75	1 908

Note. Source: Authors' survey data. Questionnaire item: "Have you heard of cases of bribery in private enterprises? If so, please indicate the likelihood of corruption occurring." *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *n* = valid responses; 1 = never; 7 = very often.

An examination of [Table 5](#) reveals that, among private-sector contexts, driving schools exhibit the most pronounced prevalence of bribery. A mean score of 5.45 situates this domain well above the midpoint of the seven-point likelihood scale, while a mode of 7, indicating "always" or "almost always", reveals a concentrated consensus regarding the pervasiveness of illicit payments. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.73 further suggests tight clustering around high-frequency assessments, underscoring a widely shared belief that bribery is a routine mechanism for bypassing regulations or accelerating the licensing process in this setting.

Private clinics occupy a secondary tier of perceived susceptibility, with a mean rating of 4.46. Although the modal response of 7 suggests that a substantial subgroup perceives bribery as nearly ubiquitous in medical contexts, the higher standard deviation of 1.95 points to a more polarized distribution. Some respondents evidently view private health care as rife with under-the-table payments, potentially to secure expedited appointments or preferential treatment, while others regard it as operating primarily within legitimate transactional norms. This divergence likely reflects heterogeneity in clinic type, geographic region, or socioeconomic clientele, resulting in highly varied personal or vicarious experiences.

Perceptions of bribery at tax advisory services and law firms are more moderate. With mean scores of 4.34 and 4.60 respectively, both sectors share a modal value of 4, indicating that the plurality of respondents believe bribery occurs "sometimes" within these professional domains. Standard deviations, 1.72 for tax advisory services and 1.75 for law firms, are closely aligned, denoting similar levels of consensus around a middle-range assessment. Tax advisory services, given their proximity to fiscal regulation and revenue collection, may be perceived as sites of occasional graft involving document manipulation, tax leniency, or informal fee waivers. Law firms, by contrast, might be associated with selective case handling or informal judicial referrals, though such practices are viewed neither as entrenched nor exceptional. All four categories exhibit the full span of possible responses, from 1 ("never") to 7 ("always"), underscoring the heterogeneity of individual experience or circulating narratives regarding private-sector corruption. With sample sizes approaching 1 900 in each category, these findings rest on a robust empirical foundation. The pronounced contrast between driving schools and the other three sectors delineates a reputational hierarchy: respondents overwhelmingly associate driving instruction with systemic corruption, while clinics and professional service providers elicit more ambivalent evaluations. Tax advisory services and law firms, although not exonerated, are perceived as settings where bribery arises intermittently rather than pervasively.

Results map a differentiated topology of perceived bribery across the private sector. Domains marked by high-volume, procedurally rigid transactions, such as driving schools, are considered particularly vulnerable to corrupt inducements. By contrast, health care generates bifurcated perceptions reflecting inconsistent patient experiences, while professional services occupy a median position, seen as susceptible but not systematically compromised. This nuanced portrait suggests that anti-corruption interventions in the private sector must

be attuned to sector-specific dynamics, including transaction frequency, regulatory opacity, and client vulnerability.

The descriptive findings collectively reflect a differentiated pattern of institutional trust erosion shaped by sectoral exposure to corruption. Public institutions are perceived as structurally opaque and clientelist, whereas private-sector actors are viewed as inconsistently regulated yet less politically entangled. Informal payments emerge not merely as sources of economic distortion but as behavioral indicators of diminished expectations of procedural fairness. These patterns reinforce the study's central premise that corruption and trust interact through context-bound mechanisms rather than abstract typological classifications.

Table 6

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Age groups	Count	%	Gender	Count	%
10–20	76	3.85	Male	918	46.53
21–30	528	26.76	Female	1 044	52.91
31–40	423	21.44	No answer	11	0.56
41–50	429	21.74			
51–60	309	15.66			
61–70	68	3.45			
71–80	14	0.71			
80–89	2	0.10			
No answer	16	0.81			
Don't know / Don't answer	108	5.47			

Note. Source: Authors' survey data; percentages are based on the total sample ($n = 1\,973$).

The demographic profile of the survey sample, as shown in [Table 6](#), evidences a pronounced skew toward individuals situated within the central decades of the professional life course. Respondents aged 21–30 constitute the modal cohort, numbering 528 and comprising approximately one-quarter of the total sample. Adjacent age brackets, 31–40 ($n = 423$) and 41–50 ($n = 429$), each account for marginally more than one-fifth of respondents. Collectively, these three contiguous cohorts encompass nearly two-thirds of all participants, thereby privileging the perspectives of mid-career adults whose occupational trajectories and civic involvements likely intersect both public and private institutional domains.

By contrast, representation diminishes markedly at the temporal peripheries of the life span. The 10–20 age group, comprising only 76 individuals, signals a limited incorporation of late-adolescent perspectives. At the upper end of the distribution, the 51–60 bracket includes 309 respondents, whereas those aged 61–70 number a mere 68. The 71–80 cohort is represented by just 14 individuals, with an additional 2 respondents aged 80–89. This stark attenuation of representation at both ends of the age spectrum constrains the analytic generalizability of findings to cohorts in transitional or post-employment phases, whose accrued institutional experiences may render their perceptions of corruption and trust qualitatively distinct from those of their younger counterparts.

Nonresponse in the age variable, though not overwhelming, is analytically consequential. Sixteen individuals omitted a response, while 108 selected the indeterminate option "Don't know / Don't answer", yielding a cumulative nonresponse rate approaching 9%. While the vast majority of respondents furnished usable age data, this degree of item nonresponse introduces potential bias into age-stratified analyses, particularly at the distributional margins where small cell sizes compound the risk of interpretive volatility. Analysts are thus

advised to approach generational inferences with epistemic caution, attending to the potential distortions introduced by this nontrivial degree of missingness.

The sample's gender distribution is characterized by a slight but notable female majority. Of the 1 962 respondents who specified gender, 1 044 identified as female and 918 as male, with eleven individuals opting not to disclose. The minimal incidence of gender nonresponse further enhances the reliability of comparative analyses along gendered lines, affording a robust empirical foundation for examining attitudinal divergences in perceptions of bribery, institutional accountability, and civic oversight.

Taken together, these demographic contours highlight the analytical centrality of working-age adults and a relatively balanced gender composition, while also revealing the underrepresentation of respondents at the early and late stages of the adult life course. The interpretive ambit of the study's findings must therefore be situated within the demographic dominance of the twenty-one to fifty age range, with due acknowledgment of the epistemological limitations imposed by cohort-based asymmetries and patterns of nonresponse.

4. Discussion

Procedural corruption within Greece's public services, most prominently in health-care administration and urban planning, is perceived as widespread and appears to contribute to diminished confidence in institutional fairness and accountability. In the absence of subgroup-based inferential analysis, these findings should be interpreted as descriptive evidence of sector-specific distrust rather than as a demonstrated pattern across all demographic groups. Citizens report that routine interactions with public officials often involve requests for unofficial payments or preferential treatment, resulting in widespread disenchantment. In the private sector, by contrast, patterns of distrust are more varied: driving schools and private clinics are almost uniformly condemned, whereas legal firms and tax-advisory services receive more ambivalent assessments. Bibliometric mapping situates these empirical observations within a scholarly terrain shaped by comparative analyses of corruption across sectors and by research linking criminal accountability to ethical governance, revealing a persistent gap between normative theorization and enforcement-oriented methodologies. Collectively, these findings outline a bifurcated corruption-trust nexus in which malfeasance in state institutions most directly undermines civic legitimacy, while private-sector misconduct reinforces broader narratives of systemic inequity and client vulnerability.

Collectively, the survey and bibliometric findings reveal a systematic divergence between the experiential dimensions of corruption captured through citizen perceptions and the dominant orientations of the scholarly literature. While the survey data underscore how sector-specific corruption practices translate into differentiated patterns of institutional trust erosion, the bibliometric mapping highlights a research field largely structured around abstract governance frameworks, legal-institutional designs, and comparative typologies. This contrast reflects a broader tendency, noted in the literature, to privilege formal mechanisms of control over the relational and perceptual processes through which legitimacy is constructed or undermined in practice. By jointly examining public perceptions and scholarly discourse, the study demonstrates that institutional trust is not merely a derivative of regulatory capacity but a socially mediated outcome shaped by the frequency of interaction, the visibility of misconduct, and the perceived responsiveness of institutions.

The analysis identifies three mediating factors that shape the differential impact of corrupt practices on institutional trust: transaction frequency, regulatory opacity, and client dependence. High-frequency interactions with public agencies increase opportunities for rent-seeking and accentuate citizens' perception of illicit exchanges, thereby producing consistently low levels of trust. Sporadic engagements with private providers, by contrast, tend to frame misconduct in terms of reputational risk, as market competition and informal safeguards obscure visible wrongdoing. Regulatory opacity, manifest in ambiguous legal

provisions and limited enforcement capacity, allows both public and private actors to exploit procedural loopholes. Finally, when clients depend heavily on essential services but face few alternatives or high switching costs, the corrosive effect of corruption on trust becomes more pronounced.

Beyond structural and procedural determinants, cultural and social dynamics profoundly influence how citizens perceive corruption and institutional trust. Historical legacies of clientelism and bureaucratic patronage in Greece have nurtured enduring expectations of personalized reciprocity, shaping the moral boundaries of what is regarded as acceptable informal exchange (Charron & Lapuente, 2013). Collective experiences of inequality and perceived injustice further intensify public distrust, while persistent media narratives depicting political scandals perpetuate moral cynicism toward governing institutions (You, 2012). Cross-national evidence likewise suggests that societies characterized by strong in-group collectivism and pronounced power distance exhibit greater tolerance for minor or facilitative corruption, often interpreting it as a pragmatic strategy for negotiating rigid bureaucratic systems (Seleim & Bontis, 2009). Conversely, cultures grounded in egalitarianism and generalized social trust tend to repudiate such practices more consistently (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). These socio-cultural undercurrents intersect with institutional performance to generate heterogeneous perceptions of corruption and legitimacy. Recognizing these cultural and social mediators deepens the analysis of Greece's corruption-trust nexus by situating institutional dynamics within broader configurations of collective meaning and everyday moral reasoning (Torsello & Venard, 2015).

Institutional trust in Greece emerges as unevenly affected by corruption across the public and private sectors, reflecting differences in exposure, frequency of interaction, and institutional visibility. Within public institutions, substantive and procedural redesign is essential: establishing empowered internal oversight bodies, introducing merit-based promotion pathways, and comprehensively digitizing service workflows together limit discretionary authority and embed integrity into routine operations. Comparable initiatives in Estonia have illustrated the effectiveness of e-governance reforms in mitigating petty corruption. While Estonia differs from Greece in terms of administrative culture and the maturity of its digital infrastructure, its reforms offer illustrative value by demonstrating how transparency and automation can effectively constrain discretionary authority (Espinosa & Pino, 2024; Mungiu-Pippidi & Dadasov, 2016). Likewise, Georgia's post-2004 police reform, marked by the dissolution of corrupt departments and the introduction of transparent recruitment procedures, is widely credited with eradicating low-level bribery and enhancing the perceived legitimacy of state institutions (Kupatadze, 2012). Although its political context diverges markedly from that of Greece, the Georgian case signals the potential of disruptive interventions to restore legitimacy in low-trust institutional environments. These measures replace opaque, informal practices with transparent, rule-based protocols, thereby reducing the scope for illicit exchanges and reinforcing shared ethical norms. In parallel, private markets benefit from transparency-enhancing and consumer-empowerment interventions, such as industry-wide certification standards, accessible feedback platforms, and independent audit mechanisms, which can create reputational incentives and reveal concealed malpractices. Insights from South Korea's "Clean Portal" initiative and its corporate integrity frameworks demonstrate that mandatory disclosure platforms and public reporting mechanisms have substantially enhanced accountability and mitigated corruption-related perceptions in the private sector (Li, 2023; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

Two avenues for future research arise from the empirical and analytical limitations identified in this analysis. First, repeated cross-sectional surveys would allow monitoring of trust dynamics over time, particularly in relation to the introduction of specific reforms. By administering identical survey instruments to matched cohorts before and after procedural and transparency interventions, researchers could strengthen causal inference, identify

threshold effects, and clarify the sequence by which reforms influence trust restoration. Second, in-depth qualitative interviews with service users and frontline practitioners would provide detailed insights into how particular measures affect perceptions of integrity. Such interviews should explore stakeholders' experiences, surface unintended consequences, and guide iterative refinements to oversight structures, digital platforms, and certification protocols. Integrating these quantitative and qualitative approaches would enrich theoretical models of the corruption–trust nexus and yield practical guidance for policy design.

5. Conclusion

Rebuilding institutional trust in Greece requires the coordinated implementation of rigorous procedural reforms in the public sector and transparency-driven, consumer-empowerment strategies in private markets. By aligning reform initiatives with key mediating factors of distrust and subjecting interventions to robust longitudinal evaluation, policymakers can develop evidence-based solutions capable of restoring both legitimacy and equity. This study contributes by bridging citizen-level perceptions with meta-analytical insights from bibliometric mapping, advancing a dual understanding of corruption as both a lived institutional experience and a theoretical construct. The findings indicate that the erosion of institutional trust is not solely a function of corruption's presence, but also of its procedural normalization and sector-specific embeddedness. This reframing positions trust as a relational dynamic shaped by regulatory consistency, perceived fairness, and informal behavioral norms. The mixed-methods approach demonstrates how misalignments between scholarly discourse and public sentiment can obscure key drivers of institutional legitimacy, underscoring the need for integrative analytical frameworks that capture both normative theory and empirical complexity. Continued scholarly engagement, combining large-scale survey research with qualitative fieldwork, will be necessary to deepen understanding of the corruption–trust relationship and translate academic insights into sustainable governance practices.

The article is relevant to UN Sustainable Development Goals:



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